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ABSTRACT

In this action research study, research findings related to developing children's prosocial behavior were discussed at a seminar with parent/teachers in a cooperative nursery school to determine if post-seminar parent/teacher intervention would lead to increased prosocial behaviors in the children. Forty-seven children in the nursery school were divided into four classes and their prosocial behavior was assessed. Parent/teachers from two classes (one group of 3-year-olds, one group of 4-year-olds) participated in a 2-hour prosocial development seminar. Parent/teachers from the other two classes functioned as a control group. In the seminar group, research findings related to prosocial modeling, role playing and other techniques were discussed. Praising naturally occurring prosocial behaviors and emphasizing preferred rather than disapproved behaviors were encouraged. For seven weeks, experimental group parent/teachers kept logs of classroom interventions done as a result of the seminar. Post-intervention test results indicated significantly more ($p < .01$) prosocial behavior for experimental over control children. Data were analyzed with three-way analysis of variance followed by Scheffe multiple comparisons. It was concluded that theory and experimental findings in prosocial development can be applied to the natural preschool setting with positive results. (Author/RH)

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Prosocial Behavior: A Seminar for Preschool Teachers

Dale R. Floody

By "prosocial" or helping behavior, researchers typically mean any act that aids or benefits another (sharing, rescuing, donating, cooperating, etc.). Experimental studies concerned with the development of prosocial behavior have multiplied rapidly in the past several years (see reviews by Bryan, 1975; Rushton, 1976; Staub, 1975), as have suggestions for early childhood educators based on these studies (see Marcus & Leiserson, 1978; Moore, 1977). Unfortunately, the vast majority of past studies in the area have dealt with narrowly defined aspects of prosocial behavior, and have usually involved very brief encounters with children in laboratory situations.

Although increasing prosocial behaviors is obviously quite important to the early childhood educator, he or she might wonder about the relevance of the above narrowly defined laboratory studies to his or her daily teaching activities. As a result, it seemed worthwhile to digest available research findings into a compact but comprehensive package; to discuss this package with preschool teachers in a seminar format; and to determine if, in fact, teacher activities following the seminar would lead to increased prosocial behaviors in the children. The resultant seminar was based on an overview of a large number of studies (at least 300). Fortunately, a more manageable number of concepts or approaches frequently appear in the research literature, and it was possible to emphasize these concepts

or approaches.

The seminar (which lasted approximately two hours) involved parent/teachers from the Bordentown Parent Cooperative Nursery School in New Jersey. As it is a cooperative nursery school, the parents take turns serving as teachers - hence, the term "parent/teachers". Following the seminar, the parent/teachers were free to incorporate any of the material that they wished into their classroom activities. The following is a very brief and general overview of material discussed in the seminar.

PROSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT SEMINAR

I. Prosocial Modeling

A recurrent theme in research is that children learn through observing the acts of others ("models"). Important aspects of the modeling process seem to include: (1) the prosocial model's verbalized awareness of the fact that another needs help; (2) the model's expressions of sympathy; (3) the helping act itself; and (4) using the word "help" in summarizing the prosocial act (from Yarrow, Scott & Waxler, 1973). Following a moment of reflection, one would probably agree that preschool children could probably benefit from observing a greater number of prosocial acts. As a result, the parent/teachers were encouraged to be such models as frequently as possible (to the point even of staging situations where help was a natural response).

II. Role Playing

Children also learn by doing, acting and playing. With respect to the present discussion, it is important that they "play" at being prosocial. The parent/teachers were encouraged to describe

situations (mostly from Staub, 1971) in which someone needed help. The childrer should then be asked to provide examples of, and to act out (role play) different helping acts (the parent/teacher might wish to supplement the children's suggestions).

III. Cooperation

Research indicates that American children (even in preschool) tend to be very competitive, even when a competitive attitude is not in their best interests (see Cook & Stingle, 1974). In addition, participation in competitive activities tends to reduce subsequent prosocial or helping behavior (Barnett, 1975), and to increase subsequent aggression (Nelson, Gelfand & Hartmann, 1969). As a result, the parent/teachers were encouraged to develope and promote cooperative activities with their children.

IV. Responsibility for the Welfare of Others

Analysis of cultural differences (see Bronfenbrenner, 1972; Whiting & Whiting, 1975) indicates that even quite young children appear to be able to handle, and in fact benefit from, taking responsibility for the welfare of others. In fact, such responsibility appears to increase the possibility of subsequent prosocial behaviors. Related research here in the U.S., in which children are given the opportunity to act as teachers of other children, has produced similar results (Gaertner, Kohler & Reisman, 1971). Parent/teachers were therefore encouraged to devise situations in which children were given the opportunity of teaching other children.

V. General Considerations

Although somewhat more difficult to describe with specific examples, two rather general considerations seemed important. First,

we all too often fail to praise the child who has behaved prosocially or cooperatively, although such praise and reward will obviously increase the frequency of such behaviors (Midlarsky & Bryan, 1967). Second, and quite related, we all too often seem to tell children what not to do (for example, acting aggressively), rather than what they should do (for example, acting prosocially). Although earlier research tended to indicate that "preaching" had little effect on prosocial behavior, subsequent research has indicated quite the opposite (Rushton, 1975). In short, the parent/teachers were encouraged to (a) praise naturally occuring prosocial behaviors; and (b) to preach the "shalls" rather than the "shall nots".

ACTUAL INTERVENTIONS IN THE NURSERY SCHOOL

As was noted earlier, the parent/teachers were free to follow any of the above suggestions as they wished. Just after the seminar, they were asked to keep a log book of things they did in the classroom as a result of the seminar. What follows is a somewhat condensed and edited version of some of the things that parent/teachers wrote in the log books. As two different classes of children were involved (one of 3-year olds, and one of 4-year olds), the logs are presented separately. Also, it should be noted that the following activities took place over a period of approximately seven weeks.

3-year old class

(1) Parent/teacher acted as a model of prosocial behavior when another dropped her purse (a staged incident).

(2) During an art project, two girls were taught how to assemble egg carton flowers, then taught everyone else in the class.

Those who finished early were encouraged to help the others.

(3) Several children, engaged in cooperative group play, are pointed out to the rest of the children and praised.

(4) Child was sitting in a chair which he had tipped onto the back two legs. Group discussion and role-playing considered how the child would feel if he fell, and what others could do to help the hurt child feel better.

(5) One child found a toy lost by another. Ensuing group discussion involved helping others find things that are lost, how the helper feels (happy, pleased, etc.), and how the individual who has been helped might feel (better, not sad, etc.).

(6) During an art project, each child had to help his neighbor (that is, the project was designed in such a way as to require cooperative effort between the children).

(7) Two children were fighting over the same toy; a group of children gathered to watch. A parent/teacher asked how the situation might be resolved --- a third child immediately replied that they could share the toy (which they eventually did). Ensuing group discussion dealing with the incident.

4-year old class

(1) Easter treats were hidden in the classroom, and children were asked to present possible solutions to the following situations: (a) one child found treats but another didn't; (b) a child falls while going after a treat; and (c) a child was crying because he/she couldn't find a treat.

(2) Parent/teacher acted as a model of prosocial behavior when

another dropped a box of pencils (a staged incident).

(3) Children worked together (group cooperative effort) in painting a sign to be used at the nursery's fair the next week.

(4) Children acted out (role-playing) the following situations: (a) child grabs toy from another child; (b) child falls off of a chair; (c) child hits another child; (d) child drops a heavy box on his foot; and (e) child unable to find a place to sit in the reading circle. The children also suggested, and acted out, potential solutions to these situations.

(5) Children worked together coloring a large picture of zoo animals (the class had visited the zoo the day before).

(6) Child slipped and fell while walking to the library with the group. Ensuing group discussion considered how he felt, and what the others might be able to do to help him feel better.

EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INTERVENTION

Forty-seven preschoolers from the Bordentown Parent Cooperative Nursery School were involved in evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention. Before the seminar took place, each of the children was evaluated for propensity to engage in prosocial behaviors. Individual children accompanied the experimenter (a 27-year old male) to a small room next to their classroom. Following a short period of familiarizing the child with the setting, the experimenter and child began looking at and discussing some pictures, and the following measures were obtained:

(1) Helping an adult recover dropped items (adapted from Staub, 1971; Yarrow, Scott & Waxler, 1973). While looking at the

pictures, the experimenter "accidently" dropped a box of 40 paper clips. After expressing mild annoyance, the experimenter picked up the paper clips at a relatively slow, constant rate. The child's helping score was the number of paper clips he picked up in helping the experimenter.

(2) Donations to charity (adapted from Bryan, 1975; Rushton & Weiner, 1975). At the conclusion of the session, the child was given 20 M&M's for "coming in to look at the pictures". He was then given the opportunity to donate some of his candy to several "disadvantaged" children pictured on a collection cannister. The experimenter waited outside of the room, so that the child would be able to donate "anonymously" (the cannister always contained a constant number of M&M's "previously donated"; however, unknown to the child --- who couldn't see inside --- all of the M&M's in the cannister were green, while his were brown, red or yellow). The child's donation score was the number of M&M's donated.

The 47 children in the center were divided into four separate and distinct classes. Parent/teachers from two of the classes (one group of 3-year olds and one of 4-year olds) participated in the prosocial development seminar (the "experimental group"). Parent/teachers from the other two classes (again, one group of 3-year olds and one of 4-year olds) did not participate in the seminar (the "control group"). Experimental parent/teachers were encouraged not to discuss what they were doing (relevant to prosocial

development) with control parent/teachers. Seven weeks after the seminar took place, all of the children were again evaluated for propensity to engage in prosocial behavior using the same procedure as above.

The average number of paper clips picked up and M&M's donated by the children both before and seven weeks after the seminar are presented in Table 1. A rather complicated statistical analysis

TABLE 1. AVERAGE SCORES FOR THE TWO MEASURES OF PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

	Average Number of Paper Clips Picked Up	Average Number of M&M's Donated
Control Group Before Seminar	5.15	.87
Experimental Group Before Seminar	7.31	.82
Control Group After Seminar	2.08	.11
Experimental Group After Seminar	12.49	1.25

(3-way analysis of variance with repeated measures; followed by Scheffé multiple comparisons) indicated that the intervention was in fact quite successful. Although experimental and control children did not pick up a significantly different number of paper clips before the seminar, the experimental children picked up significantly more after the seminar ($p < .01$). The same statement is true with respect to number of M&M's donated ($p < .01$). Furthermore, the

intervention was equally successful for both boys and girls; and for both 3-year olds and 4-year olds.

DISCUSSION

A seminar in prosocial development, and resultant activities of the parent/teachers, led to increased prosocial behaviors in preschool children. At the very least, this finding points to the potential advantages of applying experimental laboratory findings to natural preschool settings.

As is generally the case, the present research leaves a number of questions unanswered. Were certain interventions by the parent/teachers more important than others? Were important types of intervention under-emphasized? Will similar results occur if the intervention is carried out by professional early childhood educators?

Perhaps most important, what influence did the intervention have on behaviors other than those measured? Although one might make the assumption that <u>other</u> behaviors in the preschool have been influenced, the assumption is based on rather indirect evidence (donations to charity and picking up paper clips). If one agrees with Bandura (1973) that the most effective method of reducing <u>aggressive</u> behavior might involve increasing the functional value of prosocial alternatives, then one might even assume that aggressive behaviors have been reduced by the seminar. Obviously, a broader variety of measures are essential in future research. However, if one believes in the importance of increasing prosocial behaviors and decreasing aggression, then the present research is clearly a step in the right direction.

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